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Cover image: Athenian Fragmentary votive sculpture of Dionysus (?) Greek Ashmolean Museum. Photograph by Mary Harrsch, CC BY-SA. Cover design by Anna Gatti.

Guest Feature 4

Amy R. Cohen on Performing and Translating Ancient Greek Drama

Amy R. Cohen, Professor of Classics at Randolph-Macon Woman's College and Director of the Whiteside Greek Theatre, discusses ancient Greek Drama.

I have two great professional passions: ancient Greek language and Greek drama.

My love affair with Greek itself goes back to switching public school systems in the Shenandoah Valley so that I could take Latin because my wise parents understood how valuable the language might be to anything I wanted to do. I had a great high school Latin teacher (Kristin Vines), and I was good at Latin: I loved the puzzle of it and the way it made me think more clearly about English. When I got to college, I signed up for Greek as soon as I could, which turned out to be a double-credit intensive class taught by the great Richard Garner, and I fell in love with Greek. And it really did feel like a love affair—that I had broken up with Latin because I had found my true love in Greek. This was bad news for my Latin but has led to an incredibly fulfilling couple of decades as a Greek professor.

Greek is physically beautiful: it curves and swoops and catches with the kind of give that lets words land gently. A page of Greek text invites you in, even as it presents you with mysteries to solve.

Those mysteries are solved by looking closely at the smallest details of the language—an ending that tells you what a word wants to do, an accent that reveals a different definition—and if you trust those clues and what they tell you, the page opens up to you and brings you treasures. Directing ancient drama works the same way: pay attention to the smallest details of the script, and you reveal

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the riches in store for us from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes.

My path into theatre ran parallel to my path into Greek: I'm the daughter of a Shakespeare professor who also spearheaded a study abroad program. Starting when I was still in elementary school, I got to see many, many plays, most of them in London, even though I was growing up in rural Virginia. After every show we went to, Shakespeare or not, we would talk about its successes and failures. Was the language obscure because a character was being deceptive? When was it simple? When was it flowery? Did the sets and costumes and lighting reveal more about the play to us? Were the actors disappearing into their roles? These discussions were even more wide-ranging when they were with a group of my father's students, which always included us no matter how late the evening had become.

I learned so much from those years of theatre: first, that talking about a play is necessary. Even before I realized that those conversations were my training as a director, they formed part of the communal involvement of seeing a play: our shared reactions and disagreements were as much a part of the experience as the time in our seats. I also started seeing what could have been better about a production. I have since learned, of course, that many things—especially time and money—are out of the control of a director, but sometimes the best shows to talk about were the worst shows to attend. Bad plays often teach more clearly what a good play is because it can be easier to articulate the elements that contribute to "badness" than to define the aspects that make a show good.

For me, bad plays were those where the work of the playwright and the actors took a backseat to the "concept" of the director, particularly when that concept found expression mostly in the design elements of the show, the parts that Aristotle would call spectacle (οψις). It seemed to me that directors were often replacing the play's ideas with their own, either to solve a perceived audience problem ("Shakespeare is hard!") or because they saw a play merely as a blank canvas for their own artistic statements. I developed a taste for a restrained directing style and spare productions, in which the focus was on the words of the script and the interactions of the actors among themselves and with the audience.

Of course, Aristotle thinks the power of tragedy doesn't require performance or actors, and he is wrong.

To return to the parallel paths: in the same year that I began taking Latin, my father co-directed his first production, having become convinced that it makes no sense to teach play texts without working on and thinking about them as plays, as texts for perfomance.² Meanwhile, I was falling in love with the details of Latin morphology and hanging out backstage at the university theatre after school. Doing drama was extracurricular, though, during my college and graduate school years: Classics degrees did not include putting on plays. But my first "real" Greek was Euripides' *Medea*, and by the time I got to graduate school I knew that I would specialize in Greek drama. There I worked on how paying attention to which roles an actor plays can change how we understand the tragedies.

Then I had the great good fortune to be seeking a Greek professor job just when Randolph-Macon Woman's College needed someone. R-MWC had a Greek Play tradition that had started in 1909 with a professor named Mabel Kate Whiteside. Miss Mabel (as she was known) and her students put on forty plays in Greek over the course of forty-five years, culminating with the entire *Oresteia* in 1954. In 1999, the college's president thought that restarting that tradition in its Greek theatre would be a good idea, and the hiring committee thought that I was the person to do it.

Since then, the Whiteside Greek Theatre has been a laboratory and a studio as well as a drama venue: we put on plays (in English) the way we think the Greeks did in Athens in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, including researching and constructing linen masks. We find out how that performance practice changes our understanding of the plays, all the while (we hope) moving and entertaining audiences who perhaps expect only a dusty museum experience when they attend. With every production, attention to the details of text and staging brings clarity to us in the company and thus to our audiences. Sometimes our work reveals new solutions for perceived problems in the plays, sometimes new aspects entirely emerge, and sometimes the work favors one interpretation over another.

For instance, in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, scholars and audiences have long been uncomfortable with the title character's seemingly sudden change of heart (from pleading for her life to volunteering to be sacrificed for the cause of the Greeks). One line our Iphigeneia was having difficulty with helped us explain her actions by leading

² He ended up co-founding the American Shakespeare Center.

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us to conclude that Iphigeneia is a young girl doing her best to understand her father's desires and meet them. That decision, based on in-depth work on the line,³ changed the way we understood the play: Iphigeneia not only changes her mind, she grows up. She hasn't just made a rash decision; she has put away childish things. Finding that out by working on how to say one particular line contributed to serious work on Euripides, and it made our show better by making the character's actions make sense.

In Sophocles' *Elektra*, too, attention to the details of the meter shows that Elektra is singing but that Orestes is speaking for her whole song after he reveals his identity (ll. 1232–1288). Elektra's exuberant song is ruining the plan that Orestes and his Tutor have set up to avenge Agamemnon's death by killing Klytemnestra—and it's hilarious! Productions seldom allow Greek tragedy to be funny, but our Elektra danced and sang around the whole stage while Orestes chased and shooshed her. Allowing the details of the meter and the words (σιγᾶν ἄμεινον, μή τις ἕνδοθεν κλύη!) along with the performance choices that flowed naturally from them revealed an almost slapstick moment in Sophocles, which then complicated our reactions to the rest of the play.

In both of these examples, details of the text and an openness to what the human interactions on stage were telling us led to productions rich with implications lost to those who come to rehearsals with a fixed idea of what the play is and must be. My advice as a professor of Greek and a director of Greek drama: approach the world with a delighted attention to detail and the world will delight you with riches.

To watch a video of Amy R. Cohen discussing her approach to directing ancient Greek plays in English, follow this link:

Amy R. Cohen, Details Matter.4

³ Line 674: ἀλλὰ ξὺν ἱεροῖς χρὴ τό γ' εὐσεβὲς σκοπεῖν. The translation had "Sacrifices are to find out how we may please the gods," and once our actor found that she could say it as a lesson learned to please her father Agamemnon, it made much more sense in the context and for the character. (W. S. Merwin and George E. Dimock, Jr., 1992. *Iphigeneia at Aulis* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press) p. 53.)

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EtYy0LVBOo.